

REVISITING OUR MISSION

Executive Leadership

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Abstract

Change has taken place in the Fargo Fire Department that significantly broadened the scope of services the department provides and that the citizens desire. The problem is that the Fargo Fire Department has not visited its mission statement to keep pace with changing demands on the department. If the departments mission continues to be to protect life and property from loss by fire, the department is allocating resources to provide services beyond its mission. If the mission of the department has grown, the mission statement needs to reflect that growth. The purpose of the research project was to identify the values and functions that organization members feel should be significant for the department, and to develop a new mission statement that reflects those values and functions. The descriptive research method was employed for this project.

The questions this research dealt with were:

1. What organizational values do department personnel feel should be articulated in the mission statement?

2. What responsibilities do department personnel feel should be articulated in the mission statement?

A survey was conducted of department members to identify those values they thought the fire department should reflect, and what functions they felt were most important for the community. They were also surveyed as to the relative length they felt a mission statement should be.

Fire fighters and Officers at or below the company officer level were surveyed separate from officers above the company officer level so results could be compared for consistency of values among different levels in the department.

Research indicated that higher ranking officers rated traditional fire suppression related functions lower than fire company personnel. This indicated that administration see fire suppression as a vital, but a secondary part of the departments mission. Research demonstrated a high degree of consistency among ranks when considering the values that should exist in the department.

This work recommends a new mission statement that represents the values and functions most accepted by

personnel, a statement defining a broader mission that will allow the department to grow while maintaining its identity.

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INTRODUCTION

The Fargo Fire Department has significantly increased the range of services it provides to the community in the last 15 years. In 1983 , the department's emergency responses were limited primarily to fire related emergencies and a limited number of rescues from other emergency situations. The department now provides a wide range of emergency services that include responses to medical emergencies, technical rescue, response to unauthorized releases of hazardous materials, as well as emergency fire responses. Non-emergency activities have expanded to include public education, fire prevention inspections, fire investigations, community CPR classes, checking and flushing all fire hydrants annually, and completing pre-fire plans for all commercial occupancies in the jurisdiction. It is obvious that the mission of the fire department has expanded well beyond the suppression and prevention of fires. The problem is that the Fargo Fire Department has not visited its mission statement to keep pace with the changing demands on the department. If the departments

mission continues to be to protect lives and property from loss by fire, the department is allocating resources that provide services beyond its mission. If the mission of the department has grown, the mission statement needs to reflect that growth. This makes it desirable to develop a meaningful and realistic mission statement that reflects current department functions and organizational values.

The purpose of this research was to identify the services, principles, and values that members of Fargo's fire department feel are significant, and use this information as the foundation for the development of a meaningful mission statement. The descriptive research methodology was employed. The research questions were:

1. What organizational values do department personnel feel should be articulated in the mission statement?
2. What responsibilities do department personnel feel should be articulated in the mission statement?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Fargo Fire Department protects a population of approximately 83,000 residents, in an area of approximately 30 square miles. The scope of the services provided by the department has expanded significantly during the last 15 years. In 1983, the department responded to less than 1,000 emergency responses annually, and these responses were limited primarily to fire related emergencies and a small number of rescues from other emergency situations. The department now responds to over 5,000 emergencies annually, and provides a wide range of emergency services that include responses to medical emergencies, technical rescue, response to unauthorized releases of hazardous materials, as well as emergency fire responses. The broadening of the range of services provided has been due primarily as a response to community needs. For example, in 1997, approximately 50 percent of the emergencies the department responded to were medical emergencies. The fire department began responding to medical emergencies because it can respond to most areas in the city in less than four minutes, as compared to the

ambulance service that defines its level of service as being able to respond to 90 percent of the city in less than 10 minutes. This much lower response time generated a demand for the department to respond to medical emergencies. A similar demand has been placed on the department in the areas of emergency response to unauthorized hazardous materials releases, and emergency responses to technical rescue situations. The mission of the fire department has expanded well beyond the suppression and prevention of fires. The mission statement needs to reflect this growth.

The National Fire Academy Executive Leadership Course includes a unit on assessing organizational culture. Organizational culture is a key component in defining a mission statement if it is going to be an accurate reflection of the department.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Historically the fire service had a very simple mission definition. It was "to protect life and property from loss by fire."(Hoffmann, 1991, p 57) "An historical review of public fire department organizations in the United States reveals that fire departments are originated to control unwanted fires successfully. The individual citizen in the community appears to express the attitude 'the fire department will take care of it--if I have a fire.'" (Hickey, 1973, p.3)

Today, the functions of the fire service have expanded considerably. Actions in which we will be the lead agency are: fire suppression, fire prevention, vehicle rescue, control of hazardous materials emergencies and rescue of trapped, lost, or injured persons. Actions that this department will take a subordinate role are: emergency medical service, evacuations/relocation of civilians, radiological emergencies, responses to natural disasters, cleanup of hazmat emergencies and response to terrorist or acts of civil disturbances.(Knapp, 1992)

Steven Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* points out, missions are not created; they are discovered. Discovering what we really are, can be a painful process, but one that is liberating. "A good mission statement fits like a saddle--snug enough for function and safety, but slack enough to allow breathing space for the one obliged to wear it" (Welser, 1993, p.90).

There is a tendency in literature that indicates mission statements should be relatively short in length. "The mission statement is more than a motto or slogan...it summarizes the spirit of the organization in a single sentence." (Welser, 1993, p.90) " It should define in broad strokes: what primary outcomes the agency hopes to achieve, who are its customers, and how outcomes will be achieved." (Bachtler, 1995, p.65) " At minimum, the departmental mission statement blends an awareness of community needs and resources into an expression of best intentions." (Welser, 1993, p. 90) "In short, this mission statement accounts for all the tasks, values, motivators, and satisfiers that apply to the department and its service area. All that in 25

words or so" (Welser, 1993, p.90).

Cortez Lawrence, however, does not feel that short mission statements adequately define the services and limitations of an organization. He stated that this type of statement provides fire fighters and citizens alike with some feeling for what the organization intends to do, but only in a very general way. It may not provide any real direction or motivation, and it's not likely to imbue members with organizational vision and values or zeal for the organization's goals.(1997)

A total of 66 fire department mission statements were gathered at my last visit to the National Fire Academy. These were reviewed and the shortest was five words, and the longest was 222 words. The average mission statement reviewed contained 46 words.

Another aspect common in the literature is the importance of group input when stating the department's mission. Bachtler writes, "Remember, a mission statement written by the chief in isolation, without input from others, will always be just the chief's mission." (1995,

p.65) Bachtler goes on to state one of the most important features of a mission statement is for everyone in the department to buy into the mission statement and to be totally committed to it. Mozingo(1994) agrees. The statement itself is not as important as what you accomplish with the process. You're getting people involved and they are providing input. This makes them feel like part of the team and develops better cooperation and understanding among all participants. If only a select few write the mission statement, then the rest of the group may not "buy in" to it. You're also losing one of the primary purposes--reshaping thinking. If you involve people it becomes a key method of improvement. It also will bring people together to develop cooperation, enhance trust, and create something greater than individual efforts can create.

Another theme that is common in literature is the idea that the mission must truthfully represent the department. "The whole idea behind creating a mission statement was to reflect on what an organization was really about. Putting words down was easy, the truth-telling part was difficult

because often we have internal conflicts in our mission.

For example, what happens when preserving jobs threatens our ability to compete?" (Becknell, 1997, p.9) Bachtler states, "The statement must be based on facts." (1995, p.65)

Becknell goes on to say that apathy may stem from the fact that fancy mission statements rarely tell all the truths.

They rarely reflect what is really going on in an organization.... If the organization is a not-for-profit, public organization, the subtext to its mission may be to preserve the jobs of its people, retain its right to exist or maintain its political base

"There are only three ground rules in an effective mission statement. First, it must exist. Second, it must be written and posted so that all can review it from time to time. Thirdly, everything you do in the organization should be consistent with the mission statement." (Coleman, 1993, p. 36) "This leads to congruity. Any time you undertake an activity in the organization, someone needs to periodically place that activity in the context to the mission statement.

Does it assist you in achieving your organization's

mission? If the answer is yes, then pursue it to the degree that your resources allow. However, if the activity is incongruent with the mission statement, you should take time to reconsider. Organizations that allow themselves to be buried by participating in activities that are not directed toward their mission statement often become very blurred and difficult to evaluate from an outsider's point of view." (Coleman, 1993, p.37)

The literature tends to form a consensus on several points. First, the mission statement must fit well enough for the organization to function, but must be loose enough to allow growth. Second, authors of articles about fire department statements typically say these statements should be limited to a single sentence, or about 25 words. Authors of mission statements tend to use several sentences, and average about twice that number of words. Third, if the mission statement is going to be representative of the organization, the organization must be represented in its development. Finally, the statement must honestly and accurately represent the department. As Coleman states,

"Although, at times wordy and a bit flowery, mission statements help us to define our basic goals and the reasons we do what we do." (1997, p.62)

Due to the inconsistencies in literature as to the desirable length of a mission statement, it was decided to include a question on the survey of personnel as to how long they felt the statement should be. To ensure the mission was representative of the organization, personnel were surveyed to determine what values and functions they felt should be most important to the department.

PROCEDURES

Survey Sample

All fire suppression personnel working on three consecutive days were surveyed. All fire prevention, maintenance, and administrative personnel were surveyed. Only those suppression personnel on vacation, or on sick leave were not surveyed.

Assumptions and limitations

The assumption was made that respondents would reply to the survey honestly. Care was taken to accurately transfer information from survey forms to a summary statement, and this information was verified twice. Out of a population of 84 individuals, 71 were surveyed. Due to this large sample, I am assuming a high degree of confidence that respondents are an accurate representation of the department. Therefore, I expect internal validity of the study to be high. This study was internal to the department so there is no claim to external validity of the results. That is to say that this information cannot be

expected to be accurate for any department other than the Fargo Fire Department.

Instrumentation

The survey gathered information on what members felt the appropriate length of the mission statement should be, what values they thought should exist in the department, and what top five functions they felt the department should perform. To determine appropriate length, respondents were simply asked if the mission statement should be short enough for members of the department to remember and why.

To determine the top five values personnel felt should exist in the department, respondents were given a list of 12 values to select the top five from, and a blank was provided for them to specify others. The list of 12 values listed were a compilation of all of the values expressed in the 66 mission statements gathered from other departments. The twelve values listed were:

Accountability	Compassion
Concern for employees	Continuous improvement
Courtesy	Creativity

Customer Service	Dedication
Image	Performance
Professionalism	Progressive

The 10 choices of fire department functions were also a result of selecting those functions listed in the 66 mission statements reviewed. Again, a blank was provided for specific input from the respondents. The 10 functions listed as choices were:

Hazmat Emergencies	Emergency Medical
Fire Prevention	Fire Suppression
Prevent Harm	Protect Life and Property
Public Education	Rescue trapped persons
Survive and Prosper	Vehicle Rescue

To determine a ranking for the top five values and functions, respondents were asked to rank the five they felt were most important one through five, with one being the most important. When all surveys were completed, every number one rating was given a value of five points, every number two rating was given a value of four points, and so forth, until every fifth place rating was given a point

value of only one point. In this manner, the values and functions with the highest point values were determined to be most important to personnel. Computations would have been easier if respondents would have been asked to rank the top five functions with five being the most important and one being the fifth most important, then I could have simply added up the numbers to determine placement. However, I was concerned that respondents may find this confusing, and I did not want confusion to limit the validity of the study.

RESULTS

Survey respondents represented the following groups:

Company Officers and below 65 (84% of population)

Chief Officers 6 (100% of population)

Total Respondents 71 (85% of population)

The responses to survey questions were as follows:

1. Is it important to have a mission statement that is short enough for every member of the department to remember?

<u>Survey Group</u>	<u>Yes Response</u>
Company Officers and below	73%
Chief Officers	50%

2. Rank the five top values you feel should exist in the fire department.

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Company Officers and below</u>	<u>Chief Officers</u>
1.	Professionalism	Customer Service
2.	Customer Service	Performance
3.	Performance	Professionalism
4.	Concern for Employees	Dedication
5.	Dedication	Progressive

3. Rank in order the top five functions the fire department performs.

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Company Officers and below</u>	<u>Chief Officers</u>
1.	Protect life and property	Protect life and property
2.	Fire Suppression	Fire Prevention
3.	Emergency Medical Service	Fire Suppression
4.	Fire Prevention	Emergency Med

5. Public Education

Prevent Harm

Overall, 70% of respondents felt the mission statement should be short enough to remember, 17% were unsure, and 13% responded no. Of those responding that the mission statement should be short enough to remember, many commented it should be short enough to remember, but not necessary to remember. The raw scores below indicate that chief officers as well as other department personnel all rated customer service, performance, and professionalism considerably higher than other values they felt should exist in the fire department. Although, they did not agree on the order of importance. Likewise, all respondents rated four of the top five functions notably higher than the fifth. Again there was a difference in ranking but the top four functions were the same.

The raw scores for company officers and below, for the top five values were:

<u>Value</u>	<u>Raw Score</u>
Professionalism	187

Customer Service	137
Performance	136
Concern for employees	87
Dedication	81

The raw scores for chief officers for the top five values were:

<u>Value</u>	<u>Raw Score</u>
Customer Service	21
Performance	19
Professionalism	16
Dedication	9
Progressive	8

The raw scores for company officers and below, for top five functions were:

<u>Function</u>	<u>Raw Score</u>
Protect life and property	266
Fire suppression	172
Emergency medical services	154
Fire Prevention	131

Public Education 87

The raw scores for chief officers for the top five functions were:

<u>Function</u>	<u>Raw Score</u>
Protect life and property	22
Fire prevention	21
Fire suppression	16
Emergency medical service	12
Prevent Harm	8

This department wide consistency in rating the top three most important values, and top four most important functions demonstrate that members of the department at all levels share common goals. The response to research question number one is that the values; customer service, performance, and professionalism should be considered when articulating a missions statement. Similarly, the answer to research question number two is that protecting live and property, fire prevention, fire suppression, and emergency medical service are key functions to consider in the mission statement.

DISCUSSION

An important aspect common to the literature is the importance of group input when stating the department's mission. Bachtler (1995) stated that the most important feature of a mission statement is that everyone in the department buy into the mission statement and be committed to it. The surveys indicate department wide shared values that should make this possible for the Fargo Fire Department. The literature also indicates that if a mission statement is going to be representative of an organization, then the organization must be represented in its development. To ensure department wide representation, all survey instruments were hand delivered to each fire station, and personnel were given time to discuss the role of the department within our city, and their perceived role within the department.

When considering the most important functions performed by the department, those individuals providing the service on the street rated fire suppression and emergency medical services as more important than fire prevention. In

contrast, the chief officers rated fire prevention as a more important function. The view placing greater importance on fire prevention is a consistent thought throughout literature, for example, as far back as 1973, Harry Hickey projected fire suppression as a secondary but vital mission of public fire safety.

Emergency medical responses account for more than 50% of the emergency responses annually. This is by far the largest percentage of any classification of emergency response. However, chief officers rated medical responses only as number four in importance of function, and other personnel rated it as third. Also unexplained is why fire suppression activities were rated so high when less than five percent of our time is spent on fire suppression, and only one percent of our dispatches are to actual structure fires. Neither survey group felt that response to hazardous materials incidents, rescue of trapped or injured people, or vehicle rescue were significant enough to include in the top five functions.

The only desired organizational value that was in the

top five for chief officers, that was not in the top five for other personnel, was "progressive." In contrast, company officers and below ranked "concern for employees" as number four, and it did not make it into the top five for chief officers. When these results were discussed with fire fighter, they indicated that what some perceive as progressive, others perceive of as unnecessary change. Change that is often made without consideration for those who it impacts the most, those providing service on the street.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on survey results, the following values should be conveyed by the mission statement: professionalism, customer service, and performance. The functions most accepted by department personnel for inclusion in the mission statement were: protect life and property, fire prevention, fire suppression, and emergency medical services.

The following mission statement is recommended:

Protect lives and property from fire and other emergencies; to respond to emergencies in a professional and courteous manner; to reduce the rate of emergencies through public education and code enforcement.

This statement includes the number one function for all personnel, "protect life and property." It deals with the importance of fire suppression by the mention of responding to fire emergencies. It stresses the importance of fire prevention, as an important tool to reduce the rate of emergencies through public education and code enforcement. This statement groups emergency medical responses with other emergencies, so as not to exclude other types of emergencies

we currently respond to, and not to limit the type of responses we may be faced with in the future.

This statement deals with professionalism, and customer service when describing the type of desired response, "in a professional and courteous manner." The only value in the top three not included in the statement was performance, and for this literature provides the key. In *The Fire Chief's Handbook*, Bachtler indicates that phrases like ". . .in the most economical manner. . ." and similar statement are better left out of the mission statement, and generally are considered assumed. (1995)

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APPENDIX A

MISSION STATEMENT SURVEY

1 What is your perception of the mission of the Fargo Fire Department?

2. Is it important to have a mission statement that is short enough for every member of the department to remember?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure

Why?

3. Rank in order the top five values you feel should exist in the fire department

- ☐ Accountability
- ☐ Compassion
- ☐ Concern for employees
- ☐ Continuous improvement
- ☐ Courtesy
- ☐ Creativity
- ☐ Customer Service
- ☐ Dedication
- ☐ Image
- ☐ Performance
- ☐ Professionalism
- ☐ Progressive
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

4. Rank in order the top five functions the fire department performs.

- ☐ Control of hazmat emergencies
- ☐ Emergency medical services
- ☐ Fire prevention
- ☐ Fire suppression
- ☐ Prevent harm
- ☐ Protect life and property
- ☐ Public education
- ☐ Rescue trapped, lost or injured persons
- ☐ Survive and prosper
- ☐ Vehicle rescue
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____